



THOUGHTS FROM CAPITOL HILL
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Delivering federal funding to district, state is my job

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Some have criticized me for voting against a massive spending bill that included funding for projects that I worked to secure. However, member projects, also known as earmarks, account for less than **2 percent** of the spending in the \$410 billion omnibus bill. In this tough economy, the federal government must do everything it can to control government spending and be good stewards of taxpayer dollars. I do not believe this bill accomplished either of these.

However, as a representative of one of the poorest districts in the U.S., if the federal government is going to spend that money regardless of how I vote, I am going to make sure Louisiana gets its share.

I was sent to Washington to be an advocate for the needs of the residents of the 5th District. In addition to supporting tax relief measures for hard-working families, I am going to do all I can to redirect federal funding back home.

The federal funding I have secured for Louisiana has been for legitimate projects – projects which were requested by La. Senators, local officials or organizations such as mayors' offices, chambers of commerce, universities and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

I've recently heard the quote "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money" numerous times during the past weeks. Critics of earmarks argue that projects requesting federal funding should go through a so-called merit system. I make this argument: If you wait for a merit system here, or a merit system there, pretty soon all you are doing is really waiting. I challenge critics to ask funding recipients at local universities or small municipalities what would happen if financial support was strictly based on a merit system. I bet they would say, "We're still waiting."

Another common misconception is that the process of earmarking essentially raises the spending level. Earmarks simply direct federal agencies where to allocate portions of the set funding. The agencies will receive this money regardless of whether or not earmarks are included. Removing earmarks would merely eliminate the allocation of appropriated funds, not lower the spending level.

Some of the earmarks I have been criticized for were for local projects, such as \$1.4 million for a new terminal at the Monroe Regional Airport, and for regional projects, such as \$61 million for necessary levee maintenance and construction along the Mississippi River from Illinois down to Louisiana.

I am beginning my fifth year as a member of the House Appropriations Committee,

and despite the scrutiny and false conceptions the word “earmark” conjures for some, I continue to regard my appointment as an opportunity to not only ensure the needs of the 5th District are represented in Congress but also as a duty to the American people to make certain the federal government responsibly exercises the power over the appropriations process.

Since my election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2002, I’ve witnessed the increased scrutiny that each appropriations bill faces yearly. One positive result that this increased scrutiny has yielded is that all requests must have the name of the requesting Member of Congress. Each of my earmarks in the 2009 Omnibus Bill has my name listed beside it, and I proudly answer for the merit for these projects.

Many critics seem to want to eliminate a system that actually works – a system, provided transparency is assured, allows elected officials to exercise judgment in the best use of their taxpayers’ money.

Instead, these critics would rather individuals – individuals that do not answer to voters, have probably never traveled to the 5th District, and cannot even locate Olla on a map – decide what projects in our state deserve funding. I don’t buy such rhetoric.

Rather than give up on a system that has proven to be effective when exercised correctly, Congress should do a better job of holding itself accountable and ensuring this constitutional right upholds the standards intended.

The resolution for the earmark debate should not be to eliminate the system but to reform it – to ensure all earmarks meet guidelines and regulations, and to provide transparency to America’s taxpaying citizens.

There are still reforms that need to be made, but my earmark requests were done the proper way.

I am not ready to abandon the system that will have a positive effect on the 5th District and our state.

As a public official, I accept and expect the criticism of securing federal funding for worthwhile projects. What my district and Louisiana can’t accept and should not expect is that a bureaucrat in Washington will know where to direct tax dollars back home. I am sent to Washington to make sure these beneficial projects are not overlooked.

U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman, represents the 5th Congressional District and serves on the House Appropriations Committee. He can be reached at the Monroe District Office (318-322-3500), the Alexandria District Office (318-445-0818) or Washington, D.C. (202-225-8490.) Visit Alexander's Web site at www.house.gov/alexander or write him at 316 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515.

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